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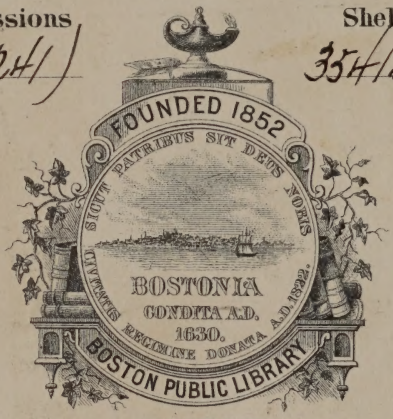

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THE

FREE RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATION:

ITS TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AND THEIR MEANING.

AN ADDRESS FOR THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ASSOCIATION, AT TREMONT TEMPLE, BOSTON, MAY 27th, 1892.

BY

WILLIAM J. POTTER.

PRECEDED BY A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE ANNUAL CONVENTION.

BOSTON:
PUBLISHED BY THE FREE RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA.
1892.

PRICE, 25 CENTS.

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REPORT

OF THE

TWENTY-FIFTH ANNUAL CONVENTION.

The Free Religious Association of America convened for its Twenty-Fifth Annual Convention and Festival in the Social Hall, Tremont Temple building, Thursday, May 26th, 1892, at 4 P.M. The President William J. Potter, in the chair.

The record of the last meeting was read by the Secretary, Daniel G. Crandon, and accepted.

The Treasurer, John C. Haynes, presented his annual report, which was accepted.

Mr. David H. Clark, Chairman of the Committee to nominate Officers for the coming year, reported the list of the previous year with the exception of those whose time expired and with the addition of names to take their places.

The list, being voted on by ballot, was elected.

The Friday morning and afternoon sessions of the Convention, June 27th, were held in the large hall of Tremont Temple; large audiences were in attendance at both meetings.

Mr. Moncure D. Conway, one of the Vice-Presidents, presided in the morning and made the introductory address of welcome. The President, William J. Potter, then gave a written address entitled: "*The Free Religious Association,— its Twenty-Five Years and their Meaning.*" Brief addresses then followed on the same general subject by Dr. C. A. Bartol, Mrs. Ednah D. Cheney, Francis Ellingwood Abbot, Mrs. Anna Garlin Spencer, Paul R. Frothingham, and Daniel G. Crandon.

At the afternoon session the subject for consideration was "*Religion Considered as Social and Personal Ethics.*" William M. Salter, Lecturer of the Society for Ethical Culture in Philadel-

phia, opened the subject by a paper on "*The Next Step in Christianity.*" Addresses followed by Prof. A. E. Dolbeare of Tufts College, Mrs. Anna C. Lee, Rev. Ida C. Hultin, Moncure D. Conway.

The Festival and Supper was held in the Meionaon, Tremont Temple, Friday evening, and was largely attended. Col. T. W. Higginson presided. An original poem was read by Wm. E. Gilman. Speeches, interesting and pertinent to the occasion, were made by Mrs. Cheney, Alfred W. Martin, Mr. Conway, F. E. Abbot, Paul R. Frothingham. Most delightful music was rendered by Mr. and Mrs. Charles M. Whitney and family, known as the "*Mozart Sextet.*"

In accordance with a generally expressed desire of those who heard it, the address of President Potter, on "The Free Religious Association,—its Twenty-Five Years and their Meaning," is published by the Association.

☞ All persons interested in the work of this Association are earnestly requested to contribute to its treasury, now very much in need of funds to pay its expenses.

Send all contributions to John C. Haynes, Treasurer, 453 Washington St., Boston, Mass.

Address.

IT is twenty-five years ago this anniversary week that, in Horticultural Hall, only a few rods from this spot, the Free Religious Association came into existence. The Executive Committee have deemed it fitting that some special recognition should be made to-day of this completion of a quarter of a century; and since it happens that I am the sole person who has continuously held executive office in the Association from its beginning to the present hour, the lot has fallen to me to bring here a somewhat formal statement concerning the origin, doings and significance of the Association; on which statement, the briefer addresses of the several succeeding speakers will hinge. For their wit and wisdom you will, I know, courteously wait, while I make the frame-work which they will fill in with their eloquently uttered sentiments. For this service, I have at least one Scriptural qualification: it is similar to that claimed by (or for) the physician Luke at the beginning of the Gospel which bears his name, — that he had "had perfect understanding of all things from the very first."

"Perfect understanding of all things" is strong language. It is too strong, certainly, to use of anybody's knowledge of an Association that has laid such emphatic stress on individuality of opinion in its membership as has this Association. All that I can claim is to have stood so close to the Association, both in its sources and its subsequent activities, as to have had special vantage-ground for every kind of knowledge concerning it which rests on the ordinary laws of evidence.

Particularly asking you to remember, therefore, that no other person is involved in responsibility for what I may here say, I proceed to the theme allotted to me,—which I have named, "The Free Religious Association: its Twenty-five Years and their Meaning."

ANTE NATAL HISTORY.

Though the Free Religious Association, as I have said, came into existence twenty-five years ago this week, yet it did not leap full-grown from the brain of any man or god; nor from that large assembly that gathered in Horticultural Hall, on May 30th, 1867. That was the birthday; but there was a worthy ante-natal history. Our Association was one of the legitimate issues of that wonderful period for the gestation of ideas which came in this country in the last half of the Great War for extinguishing the Slaveholders' Rebellion. Ideas and principles which make a country worth suffering and dying for, and worth living for, were then pushed to the front. With these came President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and the beginning of all the vast consequences to human liberty and the country of that military yet moral act. Freedmen's Aid and Educational Societies sprang up. Humane men and women were close on the heels of the army, ready to go into the negro cabins with the spelling-book and arithmetic. Schools for the ex-slaves were organized, school-houses built, industrial aid rendered. The Sanitary Commissions received contributions without stint for their Good Samaritan labors. A larger idea of humanity prevailed throughout the loyal states. The pulpit, the press, the political meeting, voiced a higher law than that of material prosperity or political expediency. "The New Civilization" was a phrase frequently on the tongue to express the expectation of the country's better day.

In religion, particularly, there was an opening of doors and windows in neighborly acquaintance and sympathy, and an activity of the churches in humanitarian works that was unprecedented. By the experiences of the war, questions of traditional theology, long regarded as settled, were reopened, and were never to be closed again as before. Women of different denominations and faiths, moved by a common pity, were working together for the soldiers and the freedmen, and they could never again get so far apart as their old creeds required. Hebrews vied with Christians in contributing to these charities, and therefore seemed to belong to the same church of humanity. A noble Parsee philanthropist, of Bombay, sent a most generous

donation, with a message of sympathy, to the Sanitary Commission, and thereby raised the question of the moral possibilities of a religion called heathen. Men who had touched shoulders in battle, or who had joined hands in binding up the nation's wounds, did not again closely scrutinize each other's doctrinal beliefs. Men who had faced death together, and had seen comrades fall from their side on the field or in the hospital, dying bravely and in peace without the saving grace of any ecclesiastical ceremony; men and women who surrendered their loved ones at their country's call, and, with their blessings, sent them forth ready to give life itself for their country's sin,—all these must ever afterwards see the old religious problems of atonement and salvation in a new light. And the marvellous progress away from the old theologies and towards philanthropic and social activities which has been witnessed in the churches of this country within the last twenty-five years—a progress, in my opinion, unparalleled in any other twenty-five years of Christian history, not excepting even the era of the Protestant Reformation—this progress, when its conditions shall have been fully investigated, will be found, I believe, to be very largely the direct consequence of that great awakening of rational thought and of the higher moral sentiments and humane activities, which characterized the last years of the Civil War and the first years of the period of Reconstruction.

I have purposely dwelt upon this point, because, in considering the genesis and shaping conditions of the Free Religious Association, it presents a view which has not generally received sufficient attention. Moreover, there are certain facts which show that the Association, in its origin had a specially direct connection with that religious *Renaissance.*

CONNECTION WITH UNITARIANISM.

In the spring of 1865, the Unitarian churches of this country, just before the close of the War, moved by the general intellectual and moral fermentation of the time, met each other in a Convention of accredited delegates in the City of New York. The Call for that convention was animated by the new spirit of humanity. It seemed a rallying-cry not so much for

sectarian as for educational and humanitarian work,—or at least for denominational activity of a large and inclusive character and in a generous spirit of liberty. Among those responding to this call were societies and persons who had previously manifested little or no sympathy with denominational Unitarianism. The circular invitation, taking its tone from the patriotic and spiritual enthusiasms of the hour, had boldly designated the meeting as the beginning of a movement which might result speedily in the organization of "the Liberal Church of America." To help, if possible, towards that consummation, was the motive which drew to that convention a considerable number of persons who had hitherto felt little interest in the provincial ideas and policy of the (so-named) American Unitarian Association, according to its management a generation ago.

I need not rehearse the story of the contest which followed. Suffice it to say, that the result was a closer denominational organization of Unitarian Societies than had ever before existed, and under a Constitution which designated the Nazarene prophet as "our Lord Jesus Christ," and, in a special sense, as "Son of God." To not a few who had gone to the Convention in the larger spirit of the invitation, this action seemed alike the closing of the door of hospitality and of hope; and when, at the meeting of the newly organized National Conference at Syracuse in the autumn of the next year, a more systematic attempt was made to amend the Preamble and Constitution in the interests of a wider liberty, and was again emphatically defeated, it became evident that these larger hopes and hospitalities, if they were then to find organization at all, must find it elsewhere. The man who bravely led that forlorn hope at Syracuse is with us on the platform here this morning, Francis E. Abbot, and by-and-by you will have the pleasure of listening to his voice.

MEETINGS PRELIMINARY TO ORGANIZATION.

On the way home from the Syracuse Conference, several of the younger men of the defeated minority took counsel together, and even more, perhaps, with themselves in the private watch-tower of their own meditations, concerning the urgent need and

the practicability of another organization. To one of them, I know, there came, in the night watches before leaving Syracuse, a vision,—not by dream, but in those wakeful hours at night when so many high heroisms of conduct visit human souls, which, alas, are too apt to fade away under the sun's glare, into life's common and easy routine: a vision, this was, of a spiritual anti-slavery Society for meeting the new requirements of the hour; an organization in kind not unlike the American Anti-Slavery Society, whose labors had just been crowned with triumph by the Constitutional abolition of negro bondage; but an organization with the larger object of liberating religion from every sort of thraldom to irrational and merely traditional authority, and of seeking to bring people together in religious union on the basis of endeavors after righteousness and truth.

Shortly after the Syracuse Conference, a notable meeting occurred at the house of Dr. Cyrus A. Bartol in this city. I shall speak of that meeting somewhat in detail, because the difference of opinion among radical thinkers, which was there made manifest, had an important influence in shaping the Constitution and subsequent activities of the Free Religious Association. It was on almost the last of the October days in 1866, when nine persons gathered in Dr. Bartol's hospitable parlor, the host being one of the nine. Several of the young men who had come away from Syracuse with grieved hearts were of the number. Dr. Bartol had not been at Syracuse; but he had sympathetically heard their story, and he had invited them and a few other representative radical gentlemen to meet them in this private conference. The oldest of the nine was the host himself; the youngest a member of the Cambridge Divinity School, who had done brave service in the Union army. But no one of the nine was younger for liberty than Dr. Bartol.

We sat in a semi-circle around a blazing wood fire, — our host at one end of the half-circle, near the mantle where, as occasion required, he could poke and replenish the fire on the hearth, while he stirred the live coals in our hearts. Naturally he opened the conversation; and his opening was a fervid utterance of righteous indignation against what he felt to be an assault on spiritual liberty at Syracuse in the house of its pro-

fessed friends. Against this wrong he was ready for an organized vigorous protest,—yes, for "a new denomination," if need be.—It was agreed that the talk should follow the half-circle in the order we happened to sit; and next to our honored host sat Samuel Johnson,—the apostle pre-eminent of Transcendental Individualism; a prophet, too, whose noble heroisms of character matched the high nobility of his thought and his religious work. Mr. Johnson was as strongly pronounced against the action of the Unitarian Conferences as was Dr. Bartol; but he was not so astonished. To him it seemed the inevitable exigency of denominationalism, the narrowness incident to ecclesitical organization. Extensive organization carried in itself just such dangers. He believed in the individual church and in the individual preacher; in the free magazine, with an individually responsible editor, and in the Liberal lecture; but each person must make his protest and do his work independently. Beyond this, organization was likely to hamper rather than help religious liberty. — Next spoke the man who has been aptly described as "one-fourth flesh and three-fourths flame," — John Weiss. Mr. Weiss, though not working easily in the harness of organization, had no such strong repugnance of principle in the matter as Mr. Johnson. He once served as a Director in the American Unitarian Association, and afterwards in the same capacity in the Free Religious Association. But that morning his brilliant flame was drawn into the sweep of Johnson's vigorous swath. — Then came the turn of the younger men, who were fresh from the Syracuse contest. There were four of them, and they chanced to have the front of the fire-place together. Each said an earnest word for some kind of organized united action, which should protect individual liberty, and at the same time make a working fellowship for objects which we all had at heart. — Of the two speakers who followed, the first was Sidney Morse, the devoted, half-paid editor and proprietor of "The Radical" Magazine. He was doing his good work as an organization of one; and, difficult as it was to keep the work going, his sympathies were heroically given to the individual method for propagating radical ideas.—The Divinity student modestly gave the closing word for organized action,

drawing, if I remember aright, an apt illustration from his army experience.*

Thereupon the conversation became more general; and then it appeared that our worthy host, who by temperament and doctrine was a prophet of individualism, was in the process of conversion, under Johnson's strong speech, back to himself and to his own native position,—that of the individual preacher in an independent church. The talk throughout was deeply earnest, but of the most amiable earnestness. I trust that I shall not be considered as having violated any one's confidence by having here given this account of it. There was nothing said which any of the participants had any occasion afterwards to regret,—while the net result was full of significance in its bearing on coming events. This little company of nine selected radicals, of different ages, experiences, and pre-dispositions, proved to be in numbers about equally divided on the subject of our talk. With the unfledged preacher, we were five to four for organization. But when *weight* was considered—weight of years, of experience, of scholarship, of fine work and distinction already achieved—what hope for organized action could we still entertain? Yet the company separated with mutual good-will, and with the purpose to meet again for a further comparison of views.

A few weeks later another meeting was held at the same place, and of nearly the same persons, with one or two additions. There was the same difference of view; but it became apparent that those who could not conscientiously join in the work of organization would not put any obstacles in the way of those who thought that *that way* lay *their* duty. And this proved true. Samuel Johnson was a valuable ally on our platform, and always a good friend of the Association, though he never joined it; and it gave him no anxiety, apparently, that by the public he was identified with it. Mr. Weiss was one of our foremost spokesmen and an active Director. Dr. Bartol has been a frequent and welcomed speaker at our meetings,—sometimes criticising, yet with the criticism, or after it, giving us his bene-

*This was George A. Thayer, now a Unitarian minister in Cincinnati. The others who spoke for organization were Francis E. Abbot, Henry W. Brown, Edward C. Towne and Wm. J. Potter.

diction. This second meeting at his house ended with an understanding that it would be well to test the feeling of a larger number of representative persons, and that those who strongly favored organization should prepare some specific plan to present to such a meeting called for the purpose. There were three on whom this duty devolved. As I have been giving other names I may as well give theirs. They were Francis E. Abbot, Edward C. Towne, and the present speaker. And these three, after leaving Dr. Bartol's house, as they separated on Boston Common, there took each other's hands in a mutual pledge to stand true to the purpose which they had at heart until they should see it accomplished.

Meantime, by correspondence and personal interviews, there was secured for organization a strong ally, whose name alone was felt to be worth a thousand men,—Octavius B. Frothingham. Mr. Frothingham had not attended either of these preliminary meetings, nor was he at the Syracuse Conference. But he had been informed of what was going on, and entered readily into the proposed plans. He consented to serve as Chairman of the Committee for calling the larger meeting, and wrote, in the main, the invitation.

To have enlisted the aid of one already so distinguished for ability, scholarship, and culture, who was known also as an ecclesiastical and humanitarian reformer, and who had a rare gift for terse and eloquent speech whether in the pulpit or on the platform, was rightly felt to have advanced the cause far toward victory. Mr. Frothingham's invaluable service to the Association afterwards as its first President, and during his eleven years' holding of that office, proved the correctness of this view.

The proposed larger but still private conference was held on February 5, 1867. Dr. Bartol had asked the privilege of welcoming this meeting also to his house,—a hospitality as gratefully accepted as it was graciously tendered. The invitation, including a general statement of purposes, had been sent to a selected number of persons, Unitarians and others, who, it was thought, might give favorable consideration, at least, to the underlying motive of the effort. In response there came together

about twenty-five or thirty people. Among them were a number of Unitarian ministers, fewer laymen, a few women, two or three representatives of liberal Universalism, as many of liberal Quakerism, and a larger number of the members of the Twenty-eighth Congregational Society of Boston, faithful friends of the memory of Theodore Parker. Mr. Frothingham served as chairman of the meeting, and the Committee who had undertaken that preparatory service presented their plan of organization, embodying a draft of a Constitution. The task which they had assumed was no easy one. Their problem was conditioned by three points which seemed specially imperative. 1st. The Constitution must embody positively some kind of working association for those freer religious ideas and humanitarian sentiments, which the great war had produced, and in which, as I have shown, our movement itself had its root. 2nd. The organization must be so free and open as not to repel but rather to attract the sympathies of that very considerable number of able and earnest radical thinkers who were individualistic in temperament and habit. Nor were the Committee at all disposed to favor any organization which should trammel in any way their own more than others' intellectual liberty. 3rd. The new movement must be so shaped as not to be considered a secession from Unitarianism. The question of leaving existing Unitarian or any other denominational organizations must be left to each individual member's reason and conscience. This last point was deemed so important that it took verbal shape in the proposed Constitution.— After the Committee's plan had been presented and briefly explained, a discussion ensued which was exceedingly earnest, frank, and at some points intense. It lasted from 11 o'clock till nearly evening. It was a memorable occasion, but no adequate account of it can be given here.* It must suffice now to say that, while it became evident that active sympathy could not be expected from all who were present, yet the net result was to encourage those who favored organization to go forward to perfect it; and a vote was finally adopted appointing a Com-

*For those who may be interested to know more of it, it may be stated that a sketch of the meeting, though that is not in detail, was printed in the first number of *The Index*, Jan. 1, 1870.

mittee to call a public meeting, for consideration of the same plans, embodied perhaps in more matured form.

THE HORTICULTURAL HALL MEETING.

That public meeting was the gathering in Horticultural Hall yonder, to which I referred at the outset as the scene of the birth of the Free Religious Association twenty-five years ago. I have presented this antecedent history in detail, because it is matter which has hitherto been given but scantily to the public. What has followed in these twenty-five years is matter of public history and record. It may be found in the very complete Annual Reports of the Association, which have been printed in pamphlet form or in the volumes of "*The Index*." There is no need here to re-tell the story; nor to recall it any further than may be necessary for extracting its meaning. But I cannot refrain from quoting in full the laconic call for that public meeting and saying a word as to the immediate result. This is what was printed as an advertisement in several secular and religious journals of New York and Boston in the spring of 1867:

"A Public Meeting, to consider the conditions, wants and prospects of Free Religion in America, will be held on Thursday, May 30, at 10 A.M. at Horticultural Hall, Boston.

"The following persons have been asked to address the meeting, and addresses may be expected from most of them: R. W. Emerson, John Weiss, Robert Dale Owen, Wm. H. Furness, Lucretia Mott, Henry Blanchard, T. W. Higginson, D. A. Wasson, Isaac M. Wise, Oliver Johnson, F. E. Abbot and Max Lilienthal."

It was an immense surprise party which responded to this notice, in an audience which occupied every sitting place in the Hall, and almost every standing-place. Mr. Weiss, not finding the rear entrance, could not get through the crowd to the platform, before the President called his name as a speaker. Mr. Emerson, on beginning his speech, which has now gone as a classic into one of his volumes, said that he had expected to come to "a little committee meeting," and doubted on seeing the people whether he had found "the right hall." But I cannot dwell upon the character of the speeches nor the enthusi-

asm of the hearers. All those who were advertised as possible speakers were there with addresses, excepting Dr. Furness and Rabbis Wise and Lilienthal. These addresses occupied a long morning session; and in the afternoon a Committee, appointed in the morning, reported a Constitution, substantially the same as that presented at the previous Conference, and a list of officers to serve under it. Their report was adopted, and the Free Religious Association came into existence. In the chosen list of officers, while those who held or had held more or less direct connection with Unitarianism had the ascendency in numbers, Liberal Universalism, Liberal Quakerism, Spiritualism, Progressive Judaism, and the Unchurched were also represented. There was especially a very liberal representation from Theodore Parker's Society.*

In treating this chaotic period of yeaning tendencies and aims which were themselves without name, I have used personal names freely. But, now that these tendencies have found an organism, in what remains to be said I shall strictly respect the august impersonality of a corporation.

What did this newly born organism mean, is now the question. What were to be its place and service in the world? And in the answer to this question will be woven all that needs here to be said of the efforts and acts of the Association during these twenty-five years.

THE MEANING OF THE ASSOCIATION.

That the new Association meant, in general, liberty of thought, progress, a freer fellowship, more humanitarian action, respect for the rights of reason, in all matters pertaining to religion, was sufficiently apparent. But what did it mean specifically to *do?* What was it *organized* to do? What, under the conditions of its organization, *could* it do? These were the questions which at once confronted its first Executive Committee. Here were thirteen men and women of quite different re-

*The first name recorded on the roll of members is that of Ralph Waldo Emerson. It had fallen to my lot to be chosen Secretary; and he was, I think, the very first, certainly one of the first two or three, who, at the close of the meeting, handed to me the membership fee. Not feeling quite sure which of them actually put the money first into my hand, I gave the Association the benefit of the doubt, and put Mr. Emerson's name at the head of the list. I have remembered to this day the measured dignity of his words and tones as he said: "I wish to be regarded a member of this Association."

ligious antecedents, all liberal and progressive, but holding, still, quite different religious views, of different *religions* even, and of various sects and no sects in Christendom, to whom had been constitutionally intrusted "all the business and interests of the Association in the interim of its meetings." What were they to do in order to fulfil this trust, was their question. The meaning of the Association was, doubtless, to be found in its Constitution. Nowhere else has the Association spoken together as a body. But the individual minds of the Executive Committee, as also of the members generally, must be interpreters of the Constitution. And when that first Executive Committee consulted the Constitution for determining their course of practical activities, what did it tell them?

THE CONSTITUTION AS DEFINING THE MEANING.

The Constitution told them, first, that they were organized "to promote the interests of pure religion, to encourage the scientific study of theology, and to increase fellowship in the spirit," and that, "all persons interested in these objects" were "cordially invited to membership." (I quote from the Constitution as it stood originally. In the statement of objects, amendments have been made at different times, introducing verbal changes which have seemed of great importance to some members, but, in my opinion, not essentially changing the intent of the original phraseology.) Second: the Constitution said that "Membership in this Association shall leave each individual responsible for his own opinions alone, and *affect in no degree his relations to other Associations.*" This latter provision was one of vital moment as bearing on methods of practical work. Third: while an annual contribution of one dollar was required as a qualification for voting membership, "Any person desiring to co-operate with the Association" should "be considered a member, with full right to speak in its meetings;" and also "the privilege of voting" might be conferred "at any time upon the whole assembly, on questions not pertaining to the management of business." These are the only parts of the Constitution which told its meaning; and one thing, at least, they told very conclusively: that here was an Association with

an immense scope in its statement of objects and fellowship, broader than anything hitherto known in the history of religion, yet with a frame of organization the slenderest possible for any organization to have and be able to stand. The very success of the Association in bringing together into one body, even of so slender and shadowy form, a membership of many faiths and views — Jewish, Christian of various hues, non-Christian, Free-thinker, Spiritualist — eliminated certain methods of practical work from consideration almost,—as for instance, direct propagandist efforts for establishing local Free Religious Societies. If these were anywhere to come spontaneously, springing out of local soil and conditions, it was well and they were welcomed. But to send out missionary speakers to organize them, in places perhaps, where members of the Association might be conscientiously and effectively working with other bodies, was a very different thing, and a difficult thing to do consistently with that constitutional proviso that "Membership in this Association shall affect in no degree one's relations to other Associations." Some of us very soon discovered this limitation of practical possibilities. Others who came later into executive office had to pass through considerable experimenting before they made the same discovery. For not precisely the same but a similar reason—for what we may call, perhaps, the *general debility* of the Association on the side of practical organization for a closely defined and continuous purpose (without, however, implying that it is a *diseased* debility)—other schemes of activity which have been from time to time proposed, though they may have been perfectly legitimate to the constitution, have not been found practicable: as the re-organization into specific sections of research and work proposed by myself five years ago; and the plan for founding a Training School for Liberal Lecturers and Teachers brought before the Executive Committee by my able and honored predecessor in the President's chair, Felix Adler. (I have broken my rule to mention no more names, but I am sure you will forgive the fracture for that name.) It must be admitted, perhaps, that the Constitution of the Association does not provide a constituency of sufficient coherence or certainty for the execution of such

purposes as these. But, however this may be, after two years of experience, recognizing the conditions inherent in its own character, the Association accepted the fact that its mission was not to be an organizer, but an educator; not to be a builder of local institutions of its own, but to be an agitator, and a former of the public opinion which should shape society and its institutions, in a freer order, to better ends. And, afterwards, any attempt to depart radically from this *role* has met with little or no encouragement.

PRACTICAL INSTRUMENTALITIES.

The special agencies for this kind of practical work were simple and obvious. They were the public Convention, the Lecture, and the Printing Press. And these have been the instrumentalities on which the Association has chiefly relied for accomplishing its purposes. If even these, in late years, have been suffered to lapse into comparative desuetude,—if we have no longer any special publication as an organ, if we print no more Tracts, if our speakers no more perambulate through the country to hold conventions, if we have recently instituted fewer courses of Lectures, and those which we have arranged have not drawn, as once they did, reporters from New York to Boston to secure their immediate issue in the leading New York journals, we have not seen any great discouragement in these facts, but rather has our growing inactivity in these ways been to a considerable extent caused and excused by increasing activity for our ideas on the part of other organizations and publications.

In short, I am inclined to accept a phrase of our old friend and quondam helper on the Executive Committee, Wm. C. Gannett, as a pretty accurate description of the character of the Free Religious Association. (I have violated the rule again, but you will certainly forgive my naming *Wm. Gannett* in Boston.) I tried to induce him to come to this meeting: but he is so busy doing the *work* in New York State and further West, that he could not be with us to *talk* here. Without any thought of its going beyond my eye, he sent, however, a word which I propose to make his contribution to our Convention. He said

that he doubted whether he had ever quite understood what the Free Religious Association meant, — that it seemed to him to have been "a voice without a hand," — but that probably his children, who have Quaker blood in their veins, would understand it better." Yes, carrying the same kind of blood, I can testify that they will. "A voice without a hand." I, for one, am disposed to accept the phrase as a happy definition of the chief function of the Association for these twenty-five years.

"A VOICE WITHOUT A HAND."

It puts us in most honorable company. Socrates was no more than that. Nor was Jesus very much more; nor our own Emerson. They were *individual* teachers and prophets. The only unique thing about the Free Religious Association in exercising the same function is that it has sought to embody the aims and aspirations of many individuals in one organism, which should voice for this age a lofty prophetic ideal of a religion that is to come. Though the organism has not developed much of a hand, its voice has had a pervasive and penetrating quality. It has been heard in Christian churches, in Jewish synagogue, in the Mohammedan mosque. In less than one year it had found its way to India, and brought back a response from the distinguished leader of the Brahmo Somaj, the now lamented Keshub Chunder Sen. Without much of a hand to go with it, the voice has a way of commanding and using the hands of other bodies, and that is answering the purpose nearly as well. Our friend Gannett has been one of its working hands in the Western Unitarian Conference, which has moved far along toward the Free Religious position. And not to speak of what the Association's own members and special friends may be doing at their various posts of duty, it has sometimes seemed as if the Association had but to utter its voice, and a hand would somewhere show itself to act. In the second year of our existence, the Executive Committee proposed to establish headquarters in Boston, with the annex of a public reading-room, to be open on Sundays the same as other days; and an advertisement was put into Boston papers asking funds for such a reading room. At that time there was no general reading-room in

Boston open on Sundays. After two or three issues of our advertisement, there appeared beneath it in the same papers a notice that the Reading-Room of the Boston "Young Men's Christian Union" would thereafter be open for use on Sundays. Sunday opening of the Reading Room of the Public Library soon followed, and the work in Boston was done, and was imitated in other places. We had no occasion to institute our Sunday Reading-Room. Thus, without much of a hand of its own, the Free Religious Association has yet hundreds of hands elsewhere, some of them even attached to bodies called Evangelical, which are doing the things which its voice has been proclaiming. Not that the claim is to be made that the great liberal and humanitarian movement with which the churches of America are astir to-day is all owing to this Association. We are not so blinded by arrogance as to think that. The movement is in the air,—in the mental atmosphere of the age: it is the spirit of the times. The merit of the Free Religious Association is that it has first presented an ear to these nameless aspirations and tendencies, gathered them into a certain unity of mental impression, and then given to them a distinct articulation.

THE CONTENTS OF THE ASSOCIATION'S VOICE.

But what have been the contents of the voice? What has the Association been saying? This question is behind that of method, and is to be answered before we can discern the real meaning of these Twenty-five years. And for the answer we must also go to the Constitution of the Association, as we have looked there for the working methods of the Society, since there is where the Association has specifically pronounced its word together. Of course every member has an inherent and prescriptive right to interpret the Constitution for himself. But may I venture to submit to your judgments here my interpretation of it, in seeking an answer to the above question? Let me say, moreover, that my interpretation is quite likely not to keep so close to the technical force of words and their arrangement as to prevent some infusion from the spirit of the hour when the Constitution was taking shape on paper from the brains of those

who conceived it. Please, then, receive this as my idea of the Constitution; as my idea of what the Association has been saying through the very basis and law of its organization for a quarter of a century.

First and foremost, it has emphatically and unequivocally affirmed the utmost liberty for thought in matters of religion, and the human mind itself as the seat of ultimate authority in the discovery and holding of truth: it has affirmed "Truth for Authority, and not Authority for Truth." This, to my mind, is the pivotal principle on which the Association was and is organized. Not that it is specifically stated first in the objects, but that it is implied in and pervades the entire structure of the Constitution. And this, if true, should at once set aside the impression which has prevailed, not largely, but to some extent, both within and outside of the Association, that the Association merely means "a free platform" for the hospitable reception of every kind of earnest faith and opinion. The Association does mean a free platform, but also a great deal more. It has given hospitable welcome to the voices of Roman Catholic priests and of representatives of all the leading Evangelical Protestant sects, as well as to the liberal Christian, and Jew, and Brahmin, and the unchurched. But that the Association, *as a body*, has been entirely indifferent and non-committal as to what might be the truth in this various presentation of opinions, is an impression that corresponds neither with the letter nor the spirit of its Constitution. This Association exists for certain specific ideas and principles, and not merely for a free parliament for the expression of ideas; and the free platform and its hospitalities which we uphold is one of the logical consequences of the Association's fundamental principles, not our sole premise.

Following this *primary* declaration of liberty of thought in religion as opposed to "authority," the Association has also, in my view, been saying: Secondly,—the Ethical and spiritual interests — or, what we may call, the *character* interests — of religion are paramount to all creedal and ecclesiastical interests. Thirdly,—All artificial barriers and restrictions to freedom of thought in religion, whether imposed by church or State, and whether appearing in the form of dogmatism, sectarianism, or

traditional usage, should be opposed and abolished. Fourthly,—There is a broader and finer religious fellowship than any which the sects or special religions have yet discovered. Their rival claims, each to a supreme authority for its own doctrines, bring them into mutual antagonism and warfare. But beneath these differences of doctrine and claims, there are certain sympathies of religious ideas and symphonies of religious sentiment which indicate a kindred origin and a present ground of practical unity and brotherhood. Fifthly,—Religion being one of the phenomena of human history, the modern scientific method of study is to be applied to it as to all other phenomena of the world of man and nature. (This point, I may say, has always been specifically expressed in the Constitution.) Sixthly,—The modern spirit of humanity and philanthropy is one of the most obviously practical interests of religion. It is one of the conditions for the emancipation of the human mind,—working not only for the alleviation of misery, but for the prevention and cure of moral evil, the removal of oppressive burdens, and the opening to each and all of free opportunity for the best use of their faculties and life.

THE CROWNING DECLARATION.

All these things the Free Religious Association has been saying to me through its Constitution, for these twenty-five years; and one thing more, if not so explicitly, yet by implication, and a thing greater and grander than all the rest, their ideal consummation. Following the logical lines of a growing unity in thought and purpose among the most enlightened and spiritual minds of all faiths, the Free Religious Association has been prognosticating the actual ultimate union of all the great faiths of the world in one religion; and this not by the conversion of all the others to any one of the faiths, but by the conversion and education of them all to the perception of a higher realm of truth. A quarter of a century ago, when the Free Religious Association was organized on a basis which, as to rights of membership, obliterated the line separating Christianity from other faiths, such a prophecy as this was sometimes ventured, but was apt to be regarded as the wild dream of a mere vision-

ary. But to-day our most glowing visions pale before advancing reality. I make bold to say that we who are now living will behold — nay, may already behold — the dawn of the day of a new religion, which is to be really universal in its principles and as broad as humanity in its boundaries; which is not, however, to be Christianity, nor Judaism, nor Buddhism, nor Neo-Brahmanism, but a new faith into which the specific religions are in form to die that they may continue to live in spiritual substance. The meaning of these Twenty-five years, to me, culminates in this thought; and in the remaining time during which I shall ask your attention, would that I had the power to impress the thought on your minds with the force with which it sometimes comes to my own.

A NEW RELIGION.

"A new Religion." I mean exactly what the phrase itself means. I believe that we who live in these last ten years of the nineteenth century, are just as much witnessing the birth of a new religion as were those people who lived in Judea during the first ten or first fifty years of the first century. The late Count Cavour — who died too soon, alas, for Italy and the world — if I remember his phrase aright, congratulated the coming generation on the privilege, which would be theirs, of beholding the dawn of a new religion. That almost noblest statesman of a noble time died nearly a generation ago, and the privilege he prophesied is now ours. But we must remember that religions have never been born in a day, nor amidst miracles of opened heavens and angelic choruses, nor of supernaturally produced gardens and flowers. These are the picturesque accessories which legend afterward furnishes for adorning the simple facts. Sometimes religions have been born in the throes of conflict, and have come to their thrones by the bloody trail of persecution. But to-day the new religion is coming peacefully by evolution. It is not to be created by any mechanical combination of selected elements from the different existing religions, but it is to be the organic result of their natural advancement. Yet it may be said with truth that there was not so much doctrinal break between Christianity and Judaism for the

first twenty-five years after the death of Jesus as has taken place between the ordinary doctrine held in Christian churches twenty-five years ago and the teaching of the most advanced thinkers of the Christian church to-day. It is not too much to say that Science, especially its doctrine of Evolution, has been *revolutionizing* Christian theology. Yet the process, though wonderfully rapid, is going on by the methods of Thought-evolution. The evidences of this general advance have become so patent that I need not dwell upon them. But there is one evidence of which I must speak, because it is so exactly in line with what I am now saying and with the spirit and aims of the Free Religious Association.

A PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS.

In the Executive Committee's report made to the Annual Meeting of the Association in 1872, (twenty years ago,) occurred this passage: "Some of us here may live to see the day when there shall be a World's Convention, in London, or perhaps in Boston, or San Francisco, of representatives from all the great religions of the globe,—coming together in a spirit of mutual respect, confidence, and amity for common conference on what may be for the best good of all; not to make a common creed by patching articles together from their respective faiths in which they might find themselves in agreement, but, emancipated from bondage to creed and sect, to join hands in a common effort to help mankind to higher truth and nobler living. It may be that the work of this Association will culminate in such a World's Convention—a peace convention of the religions. For that grasp of hands across the dividing line of opinion with mutual respect for the natural rights of opinion, in a common effort to get truth and to do good, is the Free Religious Association." That was one of the voices of the Free Religious Association twenty years ago. Now I wonder how many of you are aware that this voice is actually to materialize into deed this very next year, in the city of Chicago, in connection with the Columbian Exposition. A World's Parliament of Religions is to be summoned there, to include "leading representatives of all the great Historic Religions of the world,"—"Brahman, Buddhist, Confucian, Parsee, Mohammedan, Jewish, and other

Faiths," as well as representatives of the various Christian Churches. And the summons to this Parliament and the stated conditions to govern it,—that it is to be, for instance, for mutual information and profit, not for controversy, and that its object is "to promote and deepen the spirit of true brotherhood among the Religions,"—are throughout almost precisely of the same spirit and purport as the extract just given from our Executive Committee's report. Yet this Parliament is not summoned by the Free Religious Association, but by a Committee representing about all denominations of Christendom from Catholic to Quaker,—the chairman, who is the writer of the proposed plan, being a Presbyterian Doctor of Divinity.

Surely, the religious world is moving; and it would almost seem as if our occupation as an Association were gone! It is true that not all who have written an endorsement of the plan have been able to rise to the level of the great idea, and the narrowness of Christian zeal may yet come in to mar the effect. But the meeting, in any event, must be grandly educational. The religions called heathen will speak there for themselves. And when these scholarly representatives of Oriental faiths, refined in manners and morals, shall appear in Chicago, confronting the Christian sects who have hitherto shown so costly an anxiety to convert them, it is hardly within the bounds of probability that even the most conservative members of the American Board of Foreign Missions will be able to keep their missionary nerve at the proper working tension, or have a very serious apprehension that such mild, courteous, well dressed gentlemen would be in any immediate danger of going to eternal torments, even though they should have the misfortune to die suddenly in Chicago.

In fact, this Parliament of the World's Religions will be, perhaps, as remarkable a sign of the new religion that is dawning as any that is likely soon to be seen; and, centuries hence, the date of the Chicago meeting may be adopted as the new religion's birth-day: for the traditional birth-days of religions are apt to precede the fact. Christianity was not born with Jesus at Bethlehem, nor Buddhism in the miraculous forest-garden where the legend says Sakya-muni first saw the light.

I know very well that the men most prominent in this enterprise are staunch Christians and have no forethought of any such momentous result of their efforts. These Presbyterians, Baptists, Episcopalians, etc., who are working for the project are firm in the faith to-day that *Christianity* is destined to become the universal religion. Even the holders of the New Orthodoxy have not yet advanced beyond the position that human history, to use their favorite phrase, is, and is always to be, *Christo-centric.* Doctors Lyman Abbott and Heber Newton, and others of kindred views, who apply the doctrine of evolution to religion, maintain that Jesus came, by a process of natural selection, out of the loins of a race with a mighty genius for religion, as a consummation of the forces of the Eternal in the form of a perfect humanity. But, justly distinguished as these men are for ability, they are yet finite like ourselves; and whence, I have to ask, do they derive their power to determine what are all the elements of a perfect standard of life set by an infinite being for mankind during all time? Even Unitarianism clings to a tenuous shadow of this Christo-centric theory of religion, in a nervous effort, after affirming Jesus to be purely human, to find in his teaching some element so uniquely exceptional as to set him apart from all other religious prophets as having a perpetual relation to mankind which they cannot share. But this talk of a Christo-centric world is only the hazy cloud of words left by a vanishing system of theology. According to the great doctrine of evolution, as Science unfolds it, the history of man is not Christo-centric, but *Cosmo-centric.* This is true of mankind under all aspects. To make theology, philosophy, religion, society in any of its phases, turn upon the Nazarene teacher as a centre, is to provincialize them. They are all cosmo-centric. Thus only can we study them in, or hold them to, their universal relations. Only on the extreme Orthodox theory of Jesus being really the absolute and eternal God, could there be any logical affirmation of a Christo-centric humanity. But all science, as well as the scientific method of studying human history, denies so preposterous a belief as that the Absolute and Eternal Power of this universe could have been entirely incarnated

in the little more than thirty years of life, lived by a peasant-prophet of Palestine in the reign of the first two of the Caesars, —however inspiring for heroism and beautiful for saintliness such a life was.

What we are really seeing to-day is the advanced sections of the leading religions of the world moving *away* from their old and external grounds of authority, whether in a book, a church, or a person, and moving *toward* the common ground of the natural authority of reason and conscience. Through the larger view of the universe which science has now given, religion is everywhere preparing to change its base from supernaturalism to naturalism; and, with this change of base, all claims to special and exclusive communication with the sources of saving truth must logically disappear. More and more the progressive minds of the various faiths of the world are inclined to define their respective religions as synomymous with aspirations and practical efforts after Truth, Love, and Righteousness. When Jew, and Christian, and Buddhist, and Parsee, and the others, shall genuinely perceive and feel that this is the innermost vital meaning of their own faiths, must they not then recognize the intellectual and spiritual kinship of their neighbors, and all join hands in one practical fraternity? In that grasp of hands, all creed-dividing names must fall away as soon as the grasp becomes real. To be tenacious of one's own name would argue but a half acceptance of the new definition: to seek to impose one's own name on the others would be an impertinence. Or, if the names of the old religions shall continue to hold their places, it will be only for convenient designation, by their ancestral roads, of certain local and ethnical sections of the one church universal. That is the ideal goal of the new religion, which is already changing the hearts of the old religions. And there is a logic of thought and of events irresistibly drawing mankind towards this goal,—the religious "Federation of the world." If the twentieth century shall progress with the rapidity manifest in this last quarter of the nineteenth century, children may be born into the world this day who will live to see that sublime consummation.

If it be asked, in conclusion, what service the Free Religious Association is to render towards this end, or, more becomingly asked perhaps, what service is there for those of us who are awakened to these convictions, the answer may be: There is, still, work for pioneers; room, at least, for torch-bearers to light the way for the procession of the World's Religions, as they advance out of the private enclosures of their separating creeds, to take possession together of the earthly domain of the Eternal, and, in the name of a free and intelligent faith, to wield the power of the Eternal, organized in and by man for united and beneficent service.

CONSTITUTION

OF

The Free Religious Association of America.

I. This organization shall be called the Free Religious Association.

II. The objects of this Association are to encourage the scientific study of religion and ethics, to advocate freedom in religion, to increase fellowship in spirit, and to emphasize the supremacy of practical morality in all the relations of life. All persons sympathizing with these aims are cordially invited to membership.

III. Membership in this Association shall leave each individual responsible for his own opinions alone, and affect in no degree his relations to other associations; and nothing in the name or Constitution of the Association shall ever be construed as limiting membership by any test of speculative opinion or belief,—or as defining the position of the Association, collectively considered, with reference to any such opinion or belief,—or as interfering, in any other way, with that absolute freedom of thought and expression which is the natural right of every rational being. Any person desiring to co-operate with the Association shall be considered a member, with full right to speak in its meetings; but an annual contribution of one dollar shall be necessary to give a title to vote,—provided, also, that those thus entitled may at any time confer the privilege of voting upon the whole assembly, on questions not pertaining to the management of business.

IV. The officers of the Association shall be a President, twelve Vice-Presidents, a Secretary, an Assistant Secretary, a Treasurer, and twelve Directors. They shall be chosen by ballot at the annual meeting of the Association; and the President, Vice-Presidents, Secretaries, and Treasurer shall hold their offices for one year, or until their successors be chosen. The Directors shall be chosen for four years, and, at the expiration of that term, shall not be eligible for re-election until after two years. One-fourth of their number shall be chosen annually; but, at the annual meeting of 1882, the full number of twelve shall be chosen in sections of three respectively for one, two, three, and four years. The President, Secretaries, Treasurer, and Directors shall together constitute an Executive Committee, intrusted with all the business and interests of the Association in the interim of its meetings. They shall have power to fill any vacancies that may occur in their number, or in the list of Vice-Presidents, between any two annual meetings. Six members of the Executive Committee shall constitute a quorum.

V. The Annual Meeting of the Association shall be held in the city of Boston, on Thursday of what is known as "Anniversary Week," at such place and with such sessions as the Executive Committee may appoint, of which at least one month's previous notice shall be publicly given. Other meetings and conventions may be called by the Committee, according to their judgment, at such times and places as may seem to them desirable.

VI. These Articles may be amended at any Annual Meeting of the Association, by a majority vote of the members present, providing public notice of the amendment has been given with the call for the meeting.

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